New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1955

Volume XVI, Number 11 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of May 2, 1955

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Theatre Openings
"Phoenix '55"
"The Honeys"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of May 2, 1955*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Honeys"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 29, 1955

Murder Goes Exotic In 'Honeys'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Husbands get short shrift in "The Honeys," new comedy at the Longacre. In fact, they get shrouds for their pains.

The matter of exterminating disagreeable gents one is married to occupies the two heroines of the sly little play. There is an inevitable comparison with "Arsenic and Old Lace." "The Honeys" is more casual, less bombastic in its humor and creates quite a different mood.

Where the older play about amiable murder led to wild explosions of laughter, this one is more inclined to keep you constantly tickled.

There are two Mrs. Honeys, married to twins. Their spouses are loathesome characters to have around a house. The two girls are quite sweet under the circumstances.

Gleam in Eyes.

When a neighboring widow suggests that her life is worth trying, the girls get a glint in their eyes.

Their methods of murder are expedient and original. The first weapon is a balky elevator, calculated to starve a nasty old man to death if left to its own devices.

Then there turns up a harrowing if childish legend, that an oyster buried in a flower pot will yield one drop of juice lethal enough to extinguish a husband.

Although the girls are resourceful, they cannot control their luck. Before they have accomplished their purposes, they have to resort to a couple more exotic killers.

Plot Thickens.

A leg of lamb fresh from the freezer is most effective, when wielded by a lady at the end of her patience. And most fantastic of all is the thought that the chopped whiskers of an old stuffed tiger will lethally perforate a stomach.

The play is too slight and elongated from the short stories of Roald Dahl, who dramatized them, to survive with any less perfect and charming playing than it gets from this cast.

Jessica Tandy is one of the pretty, middle-aged ladies with a self-made future. She plays with genuine sweetness and inate gentility which makes it a real surprise when she finally takes action.

Dorothy Stickney is enchanting as her sister-in-law, bursting with ideas, but too innocent looking to shock anyone. She has some fabulous moments when hair-raising ideas are born in her brain, ideas which she conveys to the audience only by growing stares.

In the middle is Hume Cronyn, as both the murderees. This is bread and meat to an actor, and Mr. Cronyn acquits himself nobly. One of the grouches even fakes dandruff to make his toupee seem genuine. His brother, a judge, buys stuffed animal heads, and eats bananas while drinking scotch!

"THE HONEYS"

Comedy by Roald Dahl; staged by Frank Corsaro; settings by Ben Edwards; costumes by Motley; presented by Cheryl Crawford at the Longacre Theatre, April 28, 1955. The cast:

Maggie.....Dorothy Stickney
Mary.....Jessica Tandy
Bennett Honey...Hume Cronyn
Curtis Honey.....Hume Cronyn
Nellie Fleischman..Mary Finney
Potts.....Dana Elcar

Journal American

April 29, 1955

Dainty Romp In Dire Deeds

Hilarious Time in Store for All Who Like Art of Roald Dahl

By JOHN McCLAIN

ROALD DAHL is a brilliant writer of macabre humor and he has combined situations from a series of his short stories into a farce called "The Honeys" which Cheryl Crawford produced at the Longacre Theatre last night.

Mr. Dahl is to fiction what Charles Addams is to art. Death and destruction are incidents to be regarded with the same reverence as a man or woman slipping on a banana peel; there is somewhat the same atmosphere we encountered in "Arsenic and Old Lace." Two ladies decide they must do away with two gentlemen, and the evening is principally concerned with their polite devotion toward this end.

In this instance the ladies are sisters-in-law and they are interested in the convenient erasure of their husbands, a pair of miserable and crotchety twin brothers. One of them unsuccessfully leaves her spouse stuck between floors in the household elevator; the other feeds her lord and master a rotten oyster with even less lethal effect.

But the twin homicide is finally achieved through more ingenious media. One victim is felled with a blow from a frozen leg of lamb, which is subsequently consumed; the other from a delightful potion consisting of bismuth and chopped tiger whiskers. Whiskers perforate the intestines, old man, never leaving a clue.

The players in this dainty little romp are uniformly superb. Hume Cronyn plays both twins, a chore requiring certain agility when he is flattened behind a couch, slips out through a book-case and returns a few seconds later as the yet-alive brother. In both roles he is sour and irascible and highly humorous.

Jessica Tandy is suitably fey and fanciful as one of the determined murderers and Dorothy Stickney is incomparably saccharine and fluttery as the sister-in-law. Mary Finney comes through with a beguiling performance as the widow whose husband has already been safely dispatched to the great beyond.

There were rumors from the road that this show had been beset by director's problems, but the efforts of Frank Corsaro, as revealed last night, would disprove this. I thought it was handled with taste and discernment. Certainly Ben Edwards devised two delightful settings, especially the one of the stale living room in the Boston suburban home.

"The Honeys" is not going to be vastly popular, for it is a slow starter and the humor is extremely specialized. But if you happen to be a devotee of the Dahl school, as I must admit I am, you'll have a hilarious time.

Daily Mirror

April 29, 1955

'The Honeys' Loaded With Laughs at Longacre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

If you don't think murder can be riotously funny, you might take a look at "The Honeys." The new arrival at the Longacre Theatre is a cocktail composed of the inspired lunacy of "'Springtime for Henry" and "Arsenic and Old Lace." Roald Dahl has mixed the ingredients expertly, and the blend is delightful.

• • •

"THE HONEYS" is based on a series of stories penned by Dahl for the New Yorker. It has to do with a couple of long-suffering wives married to crotchety, self-centered and selfish brothers. They finally rebel, and decide to do in their mean spouses.

The first succeeds by bashing her victim over his doddering head with a leg of lamb, but the second has to resort to chopped tiger whiskers and seltzer, after poisoned oysters have failed to turn the trick. It sounds macabre. And it is. But in an irresistibly zany way.

In less skilled hands, "The Honeys" could have been distasteful and dismal. But Cheryl Crawford has found just the right cast to bring it off triumphantly. Jessica Tandy and Dorothy Stickney are wonderfully hilarious as the Mesdames Honey, bent on eliminating their dour better-halves.

HUME CRONYN is nothing less than terrific as the cantankerous Honey boys, Bennett and Curtis, one of whom has a half-dozen toupees to fit his varying moods, and who even sprinkles a little epsom salts on his shoulders to simulate dandruff. As for the less vain, but equally grouchy, twin, he doesn't care enough about his looks to spend the money for a wig.

Cronyn's etching of the aging eccentrics has variety and wry humor. His shakes, barks, grunts and snores were enough to send a smart first-night audience into gales of laughter. And the Tandy and Stickney airs of gleeful anticipation also drew howls.

Mary Finney, as a neighbor who has lost her husband and found happiness at long last, rounds out the artfully antic troupe of farceurs. And Dana Elcar has a few chuckle-provoking moments as an earnest but not overly bright arm of the law.

FRANK CORSARO, making his directorial bow on Broadway, we understand, has taken a small bubble, blown it up to seemingly huge size and made it soar and sparkle for three acts. This is quite a feat, for it required resource, indeed, to pad a sketchy and episodic second canto into something worthy of the first and third.

The settings by Ben Edwards and costumes by Motley are so eloquently accurate as to almost speak. They heighten and suggest admirably the dizzy doings that take place before and in them.

"The Honeys" is a cockeyed honey of a comedy. It makes no pretensions to anything other than provide an escape for the blase and bored into a world of fantastic and farcical fun. And this it does superbly. The initial customers rocked the Longacre's sturdy rafters with their robust roars. If you're looking for laughs, you'll certainly find loads of 'em now-a-nights in W. 48th St.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

April 29, 1955

THEATER

'The Honeys'

By WALTER F. KERR

"THE HONEYS" is a sort of young married ladies' version of "Arsenic and Old Lace." Maggie and Mary are the spouses, respectively, of Curtis and Bennett Honey. Bennett is the kind of man who, when he sees anyone enjoying oysters, promptly recounts the death of an accquaintance from oyster-poisoning. He is clearly a fellow who ought to be left stranded between floors in an elevator. Brother Curtis is a balding Bostonion who likes to settle himself in an armchair with a banana in one hand and a highball in the other and steadily nip at both. Something might well happen to him, too.

• • •

Something does happen to both brothers in the new farce at the Longacre. Author Roald Dahl, here building up some short stories of his from "The New Yorker," has set Maggie and Mary the task of seeing that their lords and masters are suitably embalmed, and he has provided them with two very ingenious methods of husband-disposal in addition to one very funny one. (The truly funny one is merely old-fashioned assault and battery, but it involves a splendidly giddy tug-of-war, a handsomely slung umbrella, and a near-fatal leg of lamb).

• • •

What he has not quite managed to provide is a sufficiently zany universe to house his otherwise cheerful mayhem. Murder can, of course, be hilarious stuff—provided we believe in that sweet, simple world in which all things are possible and in which no one is really maimed.

"The Honeys" is a little too casual, a little too practical, a little too domestic for that. Maggie and Mary—though they are delightfully played by Jessica Tandy and Dorothy Stickney—are all too clearly homebodies at heart, happy enough with the morning egg and some annual shuffling about of the furniture. You do not feel they are ambitious enough to aspire to murder—you can imagine them settling, very quickly indeed, for lesser triumphs.

And if Mr. Dahl has not sharpened them into blood-letting thoroughbreds, neither has he honed his lines to a throat-slitting edge. Mr. Dahl does not write clumsily; but he writes lightly for the purposes of farce. Maggie and Mary are warming to the thought of Curtis' soon leaving them:

"Is Curtis insured?"

"For twenty-five thousand. I insisted."

"Oh, Maggie—your'e so thoughtful!"

As you can see, there's nothing especially wrong with that. It brings up the subject gracefully. But it doesn't explode, either. And an evening that glides by on gentle inferences and bemused side-glances isn't an evening that can absorb several corpses, a stiff with a lampshade on his head, or the spectacle of a matron clipping a tiger's whiskers as part of her nefarious plan.

• • •

Granted the too demure and offhand manner in which the adventure is written, the company of five play it perfectly.

There is, in fact, nothing more delectable in the enterprise than Jessica Tandy's almost total serenity—especially after she has apparently tucked hubby away. Her look of modest gratitude when she is complimented on the deed, her fleeting expression of sweet surprise as she stumbles on a way of implicating Curtis in Bennett's death, her demure dismay at the thought of a sultan who has poisoned one of his wives—these are tiny but unforgettable effects.

Hume Cronyn has a double-fudge sundae of a part to dip into. Since he plays both brothers, he is invited to reach his makeup kit and his grab-bag of tricks; he comes out with both fists filled. Bennett is a palsied monster whose most emphatic utterances are preceded by a long, low buzz from the depths of his being. Curtis has an expensive whine and a habit of silently laughing while showing all his teeth. Both are nicely studied, juicily detailed cartoons—and there is a quick change in Act Two which deserves a seasonal award from somebody.

Dorothy Stickney's longing eyes, pursed lips, and restless fingers as she dreams of a husbandless cruise around the world are enchanting to behold; and she has just the delicate touch to plant a raw oyster in an azalea plant or to hum the Merry Widow Waltz as she clears away the evidence. Mary Finney is fine as a friend who has already collected her insurance, and Ben Edwards' two settings—reflecting the taste of the Honey brothers rather than the Honey wives—are wonderful horrors.

But the play hasn't the tang of good arsenic; some one has stirred in much too much orange juice.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER
April 29, 1955

'The Honeys,' a Murder Farce, Strains Points and Milks Jokes

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In "The Honeys," which opened last evening at the Longacre Theatre, Hume Cronyn plays two of the meanest men in the world, so he ought to be killed twice. And he is, too, by his two charming wives, Dorothy Stickney and Jessica Tandy. One time he is brained with a frozen leg of lamb which later is roasted across the street at Leone's and brought back to be eaten by surviving actors. The next time he is rubbed out by being fed chopped tiger whiskers.

Cronyn is amusing in his dual role of twin curmudgeons and Mmes. Tandy and Stickney are an innocent-looking pair of assassins, but "The Honeys" somehow should be funnier than it is. The author, Roald Dahl, has either tried too hard or not hard enough to make a satisfying farce, and fun pops up only now and then.

Actor Has Fun

These two brothers whom Cronyn plays are a New York fianancier and a Boston judge. One is bald, but vain enough to have an assortment of toupees, including a shaggy one to wear when it is time to have a haircut. The other is bald, too, but doesn't give a gol-ding. Both are tyrants. The characterizations are mostly on the surface, but Cronyn enjoys playing them and I enjoyed watching them last evening.

But I was way ahead of author Dahl and his director, Frank Corsaro, most of the way—and when one figures out ahead of time what is going to be said or done next, the surprise and pace necessary to a farce are gone.

Mary Finney gives a good comic touch to the role of a frisky widow whose happiness inspires the other two ladies to bereave themselves. Ben Edwards has designed two excellent settings—a New York town house and another house in a Boston suburb.

The New York Times
April 29, 1955

Theatre: Demise of Two Blackguards

Wives Do Them In in 'The Honeys'

By LEWIS FUNKE

JUDGING by the feminine laughter in the Longacre there must be a number of wives who would like to emulate the achievements of the wives on stage. For "The Honeys" in Roald Dahl's farce which had its première last night, are not so sweet as you may think they are.

Actually they're a set of twin brothers who are about as nasty a pair of irascible, crotchety and cantankerous members of the male fraternity as ever you'd want to avoid. And when their wives, suffering in silence for ever so long, decide that the pleasures of widowhood are more to be desired than the blessings of matrimony, the women in the assembly are all for the wives' successful plan of extermination.

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At this point, however, it is necessary for this department to register its dissent. Not, mind you, out of any sense of loyalty. Those blackguards deserved what they got, one finished by a whack on the noggin with a frozen leg of lamb, the other by a medicinal prescription compounded of bismuth and tiger's whiskers.

The dissent is made simply because in attempting this bit of hocus-pocus Mr. Dahl is asking for but not achieving the mad mood that is required. "The Honeys" is not sufficiently demented. The two ladies with the nefarious intentions are much too sane, unlike Joseph Kessering's mad antic that he called "Arsenic and Old Lace."

The comparison with "Arsenic and Old Lace" is, of course, inevitable, but the resemblance is only superficial. Unlike the old ladies of "Arsenic" who gleefully and innocently collected corpses for pure joy in their "innocent" pastime, the ladies here are pretty calculating about their procedure. As sisters-in-law who have undergone assorted humiliations they decide that a new, rich, full life can be theirs, if only they were rid of their husbands. To be sure, their methods of murder are most refined. In one way or another they maneuver their mates to their demise.

Having heard that oysters can be poisonous if properly treated they manage to feed them to one of the husbands. The other husband, after escaping from an elevator in which he has been locked, meets his end in a scuffle with the two ladies when his wife bops him with the leg of lamb. The notions are funny enough but there are not enough of them to keep the evening in merriment, and the quips are infrequently hilarious.

Dahl's Comedy Opens at the Longacre

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The two ladies are being played by Dorothy Stickney and Jessica Tandy. Miss Stickney, whose presence is always a delight on any stage, does nicely as the plotter for the pair. When she is inspired with the idea of shedding her mate as a result of a flash of inspiration she is comical indeed, her eyes glossy and fixed in the distance, her whole being transfixed with the anticipated pleasure of freedom. Miss Tandy, who, for all her suffering, has tried to be devoted and considerate, is effective as she divests herself of her loyalty and decides to head for widowhood.

•

Hume Cronyn plays the twin brothers and succeeds in wresting some humor from their crusty old beings. As Bennett Honey, who can't stand even a single seed in his orange juice, who thinks the height of excitement is shuffleboard in St. Petersburg and who changes his wigs so that people will think he needs a haircut, he shakes and whines and bellows.

As his twin brother Curtis, who is gluttonous at the table, throws his matches and cigar ashes all over the house and buys animal heads at auctions because he is too scared to go hunting for them, Mr. Cronyn is first-rate. And when he screws up his face in the sourest laugh you ever heard, he is vastly amusing.

Let us also say a word of praise for Mary Finney, who blossomed out after she lost her husband when he fell from a window, and really inspires the sisters with the tales of her travels and experiences. Unhappily, Miss Finney is not on stage enough. When she is she brightens matters considerably.

•

Frank Corsaro is credited with the direction and Ben Edwards has provided two sets that satisfactorily convey the homes of the curmudgeon Honeys. Indeed, it is possible to forgive the two Mrs. Honeys for their crimes. What is not so easily forgiven is the absence of more wacky humor in their shenanigans.

New York Post

April 29, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

On Killing a Couple of Husbands

Homicide being apparently one of the most amusing of crimes, Roald Dahl, a specialist in macabre humor, has made a light and entertaining little farce comedy out of the murder of a couple of distasteful husbands. Under the roguishly deceptive title of "The Honeys," it opened last night at the Longacre Theater, with Hume Cronyn seeing to it that the two victims were properly unpleasant and preposterous and Jessica Tandy and Dorothy Stickney, as the lethal wives, making sure that the murderesses were the nicest and sweetest girls unhanged.

Immediately, of course, "Arsenic and Old Lace" comes to mind. That comedy classic of the two gentle old ladies who hospitably handed out poisoned elderberry wine to lonely ancients possessed a richness and a curious kind of crazy sweetness that "The Honeys" lacks. But Mr. Dahl's sparser essay in sympathetic homicide has a quietly absurd humor of its own, and, although it appears stretched pretty thin upon occasion, it succeeds in suspending customary ethics successfully enough to provide an evening of surprisingly agreeable fun.

I suppose it would be the proper thing to speak chidingly of a play that tries to make murder seem an innocent and rather praiseworthy little parlor game, played by the most engaging of ladies. But the fact is that Mr. Dahl does make it seem that way by creating a world of amiable make-believe in which serious moral issues fade away and everything is harmlessly cozy. The humorous homicides of "The Honeys" aren't nearly as sinister as the noted hilarity of Mr. Dahl's New Yorker colleague, Charles Addams, and you can't tell me Mr. Addams is a baleful moral force.

Husbands, it seems, are a durable lot, and the two nice girls played by Miss Tandy and Miss Stickney have a lot of trouble doing away with the crotchety twin husbands portrayed by Mr. Cronyn. All sorts of methods varying from blows on the head with a leg of lamb to cut-up tiger whiskers are employed by the determined ladies, who scorn the primative system of a gay friend of theirs, who merely pushed her spouse out a window. Mr. Dahl gives evidence of believing that the only men comparatively safe these days are the bachelors.

Although it is concerned entirely with its murders and sticks to the subject of husband-slaying with a single-minded devotion, "The Honeys" is far from a sturdy play. Reviewers who have a way of scolding sex comedies by calling them elaborations of one joke could blame it for excessive preoccupation with one kind of crime. Nevertheless, in its easy-going fashion, the farce dealing with the merited doing-away of the disagreeable Honey brothers manages to maintain a proper farcical mood with a good deal of ingenuity and humor.

Such antics have to be admirably acted, with just the right mixture of credibility and preposterousness, if they are to be entertaining, and "The Honeys" is played with just the proper note. Both Miss Tandy and Miss Stickney are in excellent form, and Mr. Cronyn is humorously loathsome as the twins. As one of them, he has a nasty little closed-teeth chuckle of complacence that is wonderful. Mary Finney is helpful as the pushing friend, and, Dana Elcar assists as a gullible cop. I liked Ben Edwards' two sets, and I enjoyed the odd humor of Mr. Dahl.

"Phoenix '55"

Daily Mirror

April 25, 1955

'Phoenix '55' a Gay Spoof of Current Trends

By ROBERT COLEMAN

After a rather depressing start this season, the Phoenix Theatre is ending its second semester on a happy note. For T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton have come up with a delightful intimate revue called "Phoenix '55."

It kids the do-it-yourself craze, travel on the instalment plan, yachting, show business, life in the suburbs, television interviews, ballet and even its own sponsors. It is in the mood and manner of **such predecessors as "The Grand Street Follies" and "The Garrick Gaieties."**

HOUGHTON AND Hambleton **merit a rousing vote of thanks for bringing Nancy Walker back to the stage. This comedienne, with a marvelously expressive face, has been slighting us for TV and domesticity. With a lift of an eyebrow, a wry twist of the mouth, she can start an audience roaring.**

Fortunately, Ira Wallach has written hilarious sketches for Miss Walker and her gifted associates. David Craig has penned lyrics with clever ideas, and David Baker has backed them with pleasant and serviceable tunes. But, like so many revues of its kind, "Phoenix '55" is at its best in the laugh department.

You are likely to find nothing funnier the length of Broadway than Miss Walker, Harvey Lembeck and Joshua Shelley spoofing Bennington ingenues, frustrated playwrights and harassed theatrical managers. Miss Walker also has a field day with Lembeck, a superior comic, as prolific parents being interviewed by a highbrow airwaves commentator.

BORIS RUNANIN has choreographed a murderously satiric take-off of modern, physcological ballets. Though it had the first-nighters howling, it was no more **ridiculous than some of the stuff** we have seen presented seriously by arty troupes. It is really effective because it is more than reasonably accurate.

In Louise Hoff, Hambleton and Houghton have discovered a most ingratiating chuckle-provoker. She knows what to do with a monologue or a sketch. She and Shelley were particularly amusing as a couple of valiant pioneers in a building project on Long Island.

Others meriting salutes are Gemze de Lappe, Elton Warren, Kenneth Harvey, Bill Heyer, Marge Redmond and Elise Rhodes. In fact, a comprehensive bow is due the entire company, from chorus to principals.

* * *

MARC DANIELS has staged the romp expertly. Eldon Elder has devised simple sets that lend atmosphere and don't get in the way. And Alvin Colt has done costumes that add to the evening's impishness.

"Phoenix '55" is a smart and sophisticated musical that lampoons current fads and foibles. It dextrously applies the slapstick to the pants of the pretentious. It's loaded with laughs, and sparked by the inimitable Nancy Walker. We trust that it will become an annual event.

For it fills a void. Come to think of it, the Main Stem managers have neglected the revue form this season. And it's an indispensable part of show business. It—and a pre-theatre dinner at the famous Luchow's—offer a combination hard to beat.

"PHOENIX '55"

Revue with sketches by Ira Wallach; lyrics by David Craig; music by David Baker; music direction by Buster Davis; ballet music by John Morris; orchestrations by Ralph Burns and Clare Grundman; staged by Marc Daniels; scenery by Eldon Elder; choreography by Boris Runanin; costumes by Alvin Colt; lighting by Klaus Holm; revue based on idea by Nicholas Benton and Stark Hesseltine; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, April 23, 1955. The cast: Nancy Walker, Gemze de Lappe, Kenneth Harvey, Bill Heyer, Louise Hoff, Harvey Lembeck, Marge Redmond, Elise Rhodes, Joshua Shelley, Elton Warren, Bob Bakanic, Shellie Farrell, Jerry Fries, Jay Harnick, Dick Korthaze, Ralph McWilliams, Rain Winslow, and Cynthia Price.

The New York Times
April 25, 1955

Theatre: Satire on the Middle Class

'Phoenix '55,' a Revue, Opens Downtown

By LEWIS FUNKE

THINGS are seldom what they seem. So says, in this instance, the new, amiably satiric little revue that was presented Saturday night at the Phoenix Theatre.

Some time ago Fortune magazine, that compendium of economic knowledge about American business and industry, took a look at what it regarded as the changing market in our land. It found that there was a larger and more solvent middle class than ever before, and that because this group possessed greater opportunities for leisure and luxury buying habits and mores were in the process of alteration.

Well, says "Phoenix '55", all this may be true, but let us have a look behind the statistics and the profundities. Whereupon it proceeds to poke a mocking finger at travel on the installment plan, the do-it-yourself craze, the national mania for prize contests, the quest for culture, the retreat to the suburbs and the increase in the birth rate.

In a series of sketches by Ira Wallach and songs by David Baker, with lyrics by David Craig, all the conclusions painstakingly arrived at by the editors of Fortune are teased and taunted and good-humoredly torn to tatters. Little escapes the prodding and the probing, and because the writers have a single slant, the results are bright and funny most of the way.

Even if "Phoenix '55" were not quite as pleasant as it is, it nevertheless would be an asset for having had the good sense to bring back to the theatre Nancy Walker, one of the funniest women on our stage. Miss Walker, short of stature, mistress of the disgusted look and the pathetic shrug of the shoulder in the face of the perplexities of the universe, is hilarious.

Inventive and full of detail, from the manner in which she casually wiggles a finger to the shuffle of her feet to the raised and quizzical eyebrow, she sharpens each of the turns in which she figures. Give her a song about being an amateur tar and her experiences on the great blue sea and she can stop the show. Put her into a Freudian ballet and she can burlesque it with relish. Let her be a college graduate who has spawned a brood of offspring and she can be so tired she's side-splitting. Miss Walker is a low comedienne of the highest grade.

For company she has some winning partners. Let a word be said here for Joshua Shelley, an effective comic and Harvey Lembeck who contributes to the festivities. Louise Hoff and Marge Redmond are entertaining comediennes and Bill Heyer and Elise Rhodes make a nice singing couple. Elton Warren renders two songs charmingly.

Being a simple, intimate affair, there are no grand production numbers. But Gemze de Lappe is graceful in her dance routines amid some lovely scenery designed by Eldon Elder. Alvin Colt has not tried to knock anyone's eyes out with his costumes but they are gaily in the mood of proceedings, and Marc Daniels has kept everything bright and sprightly.

Without stretching or straining after sophistication, "Phoenix '55" is a literate adventure in comedy, a happy finale for the Phoenix Theatre's second season on Second Avenue.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun
April 25, 1955

Nancy Arrives in 'Phoenix '55'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The laughter that goes on at "Phoenix '55" is just like that lovely thunder you usually hear in a football stadium. It starts deep, thickens and spreads, then blasts.

There is no doubt that most of the lightning that precipitates that thunder at the Phoenix Theater is the wit and polish of that remarkable performer, Nancy Walker.

You can't watch the final sketch of the show and not avow that Nancy Walker is the funniest woman in the hemisphere.

It is a sharp show, this revue. It is fast and light and unpretentious. But mostly it is witty.

The proceedings kid the remarkable standard of living achieved by the great middle income group in this country since the war. You may be delightfully surprised to realize how well off you are. But wherever you stand financially, every word, every crack in "Phoenix '55" is clear as a bell.

Nancy Arrives.

Maybe the greatest news of the affair is the emergence of Miss Walker as a sophisticated, subtle, sure comedienne. She has been edging toward a calmer style in her recent appearances. Here she arrives.

As a bulldoggish Mrs. Wubble, getting a 50-grand prize for the best cupcake, she is a dauntless, matriarchal gladiator. When she spoofs current ballet styles, the result is horrendous because she is so good at the almost real thing.

Theater lovers go out of their minds as she devastates the modern flat-heeled, blue-jeaned ingenue, complete with writhing and grimy affectations.

The payoff is her playing of the exhausted subject of a TV interview. Mother of 27 children, her handling of this interlude is comic genius. Go see for yourself.

Strong Backing.

It is a bright company around Miss Walker. Harvey Lembeck is of inestimable help in the sketches. Joshua Shelley and Louise Hoff put zest in the comic songs, and Elise Rhodes and Bill Heyer agreeably handle the romantic lyrics.

Gemze de Lappe is a lovely wraith of a dancer, and Elton Warren a most agreeable soloist.

The tunes are bright, particularly "This Tuxedo Is Mine" and "Just Him." Alvin Colt's costumes are gay without overwhelming the performers, and Eldon Elder has designed striking, simple sets.

Just one more Walker note. Toward the end, Nancy suddenly sidles out of a dance number and delivers a gentle torch song. The delivery is knowing and fearless, and the lyrics are really phrased. What a talent!

Everybody at the Phoenix, front and backstage, should be in a joyful condition.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
April 25, 1955

'Phoenix '55,' New Revue, Has Nancy Walker as Star

By Walter F. Kerr

THE downtown Phoenix starts off its new musical revue by suggesting, with a sly modesty, that some of its shows this season have been dogs—just plain dogs. It then proceeds to make up for all past sins by tossing at the customers a fresh, beautifully styled, and hilariously funny end-of-the-season evening.

Most of the hilarity comes from the brooding, woebegone miseries of Nancy Walker. Miss Walker has had, over the seasons, her ups and downs as a comedienne. In "Phoenix '55" it's practically all ups.

This dismayed duckling first straggles on as a white-gloved housewife pushing a market basket; the sketch is mild, but the desultory manner is at once captivating. A few minutes later she is affectionately pinching a cupcake that has just won her fifty thousand dollars in a baking contest—the entire entertainment is based on a recent "Fortune" survey having to do with the advancing standards of American living—and even the writing seems to be improving. When a line doesn't happen to be funny, Miss Walker simply whips a man's face with the tail of her fur-piece, and makes it funny.

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Midway in the first act she has a fine, sloppy time loping about the stage in hip-boots and oilskin, explaining how she has lost "several intimate friends" taking them boating on the Sound. And then, just before the intermission, choreographer Boris Runanin hands her a nine-scene modern ballet (of the "Age of Anxiety" school) that is good enough to compete with the masterworks of the late Fannie Brice.

Miss Walker symbolically caressing the toe of a young dreamer "in search of a problem to go with his solution," Miss Walker coming down off her toes to find everybody else dead, Miss Walker seeking out a "father" with tree-branch finger tips—these are now images to cherish.

Nor does the second act fail her. Thanks to sketch-writer Ira Wallach, there is a thoroughly malicious caricature of one Geraldine Page, in dungarees. And in an 11 o'clock blockbuster called "Upper Birth," this permanently sour, permantly slatternly clown parlays a one-joke sketch into five or six minutes of hysteria. Miss Walker is right back at the head of the class.

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Mr. Runanin's contribution isn't confined to the knife-edge ballet. He turns show-stopper with a sizzling second-act opener, "This Tuxedo is Mine!" easily the fastest thing of its kind since "Steam Heat." And even in a highly conventional romantic job—that starlit pavilion is on hand again—he discovers a few fresh gestures for Gemze de Lappe. Miss de Lappe is a lovely dancer, with not quite enough to do in the show; but what she does is new and personal, discovering in old forms an intimate and beguiling accent.

Indeed, every one is ingratiating in this never too insistently pressured revue. Louise Hoff is an easy, winning interlocutor; Joshua Shelley makes great fun out of a "do-it-yourself" bit in which he removes his own appendix on a handy kitchen table; Harvey Lembeck is an eternally amiable foil, and Kenneth Harvey, Bill Heyer, and Elise Rhodes perform their more routine chores very pleasantly.

There are, sure enough, some routine things in "Phoenix '55." A couple of blackouts—notably one about drugstore pocketbooks—sag a bit. The David Craig lyrics are contemporary and knowing, but they sometimes fail to build cumulative humor on an initially promising idea. The David Baker songs make for a lively overture, then tend to blend into one another as you hear them singly. But even these items are serviceable, and the candy-box settings that Eldon Elder has provided are much more than that; they seem to have been gift-wrapped for the occasion.

The minor lapses aren't likely to bother you much. They're too completely surrounded by laughter.

Journal NEW YORK American
April 25, 1955

Nancy Has A Field Day

Comedienne's Sketches Enliven Off-Broadway Musical Offering

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE things going on downtown at the Phoenix Theatre under the inclusive title of "Phoenix '55" owe an elaborate debt to Nancy Walker.

This original musical revue which opened officially Saturday night has an amoebic idea culled from an issue of "Fortune" magazine analyzing the plight of the middle classes. It was hoped this formula would sustain the evening, but it doesn't.

As in so many of these experiments, the conception runs out of gas and splutters along, coughing for breath, and finally gets some fuel injection which will hopefully carry it down the homestretch to victory.

Here they have put all their money on Miss Walker, and she comes within a nose of winning. The fact that she doesn't quite make it is due to the pardonable time lag required for her to get on and off-stage in a variety of costumes.

For there is little else. One is led to believe, initially, that the modern pattern of life will be examined and dissected on a basis of a journalistic survey. This accounts for a couple of numbers involving charts and future projections and a couple of lame sketches, the most promising wound around a cup-cake contest.

Things Look Up

Then Miss Walker comes aboard, in her best deportment, and with some good material at her disposal, in a satirical ballet called "The Trap." From here forward things look up.

There is a sketch about a modern ingenue, with Miss Walker in dungarees in the title role, and Joshua Shelley and Harvey Lembeck, as the producer and author. This is really very funny.

Miss Walker then pulls out all the stops and uncorks a Judy Garland-type number called "A Funny Heart," introduced by Elton Warren in a charade, but effectively finished by Nancy as the heartbroken clown.

The high note of the evening comes shortly thereafter when Kenneth Harvey, as Ed Murrow, directs his TV "Person to Person" cameras at the home of a bedraggled couple whose chief claim to fame is the fact they have 27 children. Miss Walker, naturally, is the mother.

Plaudits from this department are herewith offered to Harvey Lembeck, Bill Heyer, Louise Hoff, Kenneth Harvey, Joshua Shelley, Gemze de Lappe, Elsie Rhodes, Elton Warren and Marge Redmond, and to a cute job of direction by Marc Daniels.

But it is still a small idea and it gets going too late. If anything it's Miss Walker in a walk.